

One Cool Tool

An expert explains how to use the Y pole, a tool for working with fearful dogs

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One of your animal control officers has brought in a dog found roaming the streets. The dog has a collar, and through her matted hair you can see an ID tag. But no matter how calmly you approach the dog, she is so fearful you cannot safely touch her. The dog becomes defensively aggressive, and you have to back off.

You need to handle this dog to provide the best care and to read her tag, but the dog refuses to cooperate.

What are your options?

The Traditional Catch Pole

The common option for working with uncooperative dogs is the catch pole (also known as the control pole or the snare pole). Every shelter in North America has one or knows what it is. It is the tool most ACOs and shelter staff resort to when a dog refuses to be handled.

The catch pole is a valuable and fundamental tool for the ACO, allowing an officer to work safely with potentially dangerous dogs and to catch a dog who may not be captured with a leash. With the catch pole, a properly trained ACO can catch a dog out in the open so that the animal does not have to be cornered. This is one of its most important assets. And when necessary, the catch pole also allows an ACO to work by himself, because it controls a dog in every direction she might try to move.

Unfortunately, the catch pole is not very forgiving, because if things go wrong and the dog vigorously fights the snare pole, she can become seriously injured and may even be killed. And it is not forgiving because, in effect, the snare pole motivates a dog to fight to protect herself, since a loop around the neck is very threatening and can easily inspire a dog's fear.

In addition, the control that the catch pole provides allows significant potential for abuse. Having problems with a dog? Grab the catch pole. Is the dog fighting hard? Fight back harder. If a shelter worker or ACO is not extremely attentive to the amount of force he uses, this tool can actually escalate the energy and aggravate the fight between human and dog. Without a measured, deliberate approach, the catch pole can influence the handler to be sloppy or overly aggressive.

For this reason, the catch pole should be used only as a last resort. As often as possible, shelter staff and ACOs should seek humane alternatives.

Used correctly, the Y pole can be one of these.

What Is a Y Pole?

I learned about the Y pole working with captive-wolf facilities. It is an effective and



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Rub the Y pole on the dog's cheek to greet her. This will calm the dog, and let her know that the Y pole will not hurt her.



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Place the Y pole on the dog's neck without forcing her to the wall or ground. The contact on her neck echoes the way wild dogs communicate.

humane tool for handling captive wolves without chemical immobilization.

Years ago, managers of captive-wolf programs noticed how quietly most wolves would submit to the calm use of the Y pole. It was not only amazingly calming and effective, it also allowed people to conduct physical exams, vaccinations, and minor treatments without fighting or drugging the animals. I see the same potential for the Y pole in shelters, and teach those who handle dogs about the Y pole, because I believe it embodies a compassionate approach to working with fractious canids in a calm, respectful manner.

Having used it effectively with hundreds of dogs, I believe that every professional working with dogs should know about the Y pole. Shelter workers, animal control officers, disaster responders, those rescuing dogs from puppy mills and hoarding cases, and trap/neuter/release programs may all benefit from knowing how to use this simple tool.

The Y pole is simply a "Y"-shaped metal pole with a long handle—typically 4 and a half feet long, with 6-inch tines forming the Y. But it can be made to any size. The tines are heavily padded with rubber so, should a dog bite it, his teeth will never touch the metal.

How Does It Work?

The Y pole is *not* a pin stick—it is not used to physically force the animal down. Rather, it is an extension of the human hand that can be used to safely and compassionately enter the animal's personal space, touch her, and convince her to relax. Used *properly*—with dominance *and* compassion—the Y pole's control is 75 percent psychological and only 25 percent physical. An officer's calmness and smooth movements will allow him to touch the dog while communicating to her that it is safe to submit.

One of the main reasons the Y pole works on dogs is because of their pack mentality. In the wild, dogs and other canids quickly learn to submit to more dominant animals in the pack. The Y pole placed across the dog's neck imitates the same pressure he could get from the jaws of dominant dogs.

When the Y pole is used properly, there is nothing punitive or demeaning for the dog. With this compassionate extension of the



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Place a towel over the dog's head without moving too fast and scaring her.

hand, an interaction can actually build more trust and tolerance between the dog and her handler.

Many people learning about the Y pole have said that, in order to successfully use it, they would have to redefine their concepts, change habits, and interact with each dog in a whole new way. The Y pole requires us to invite the dog to participate in the handling rather than continue our usual habit of forcing ourselves on the dog to catch her.

Other people are enthusiastic about the tool for the same reasons, and have told me that their desire to work with fearful dogs with calmness, compassion, and respect is embodied in the Y pole because it requires them to be steadily mindful of being compassionate and helping the dog feel safe.

How to Use a Y Pole Setting Up the Situation

To successfully handle a dog with a Y pole, the dog must be contained. She can be in a large pen or room, or in a small kennel. If the animal is in a large pen, you must reduce the space available to her; a "wall" of calm people can slowly move a dog into a corner. But be sensitive and respon-

sive to the dog's behavior and personality. Instead of putting steady pressure on the dog as you move her and continuing that way, move in waves. Take a few steps, then stop and settle. Take another few steps, then stop and settle. With most dogs, you can do this in a way that calms the animal and lowers everyone's energy. (For an example, watch the video "Using Dominance to Humanely Catch a Wolf" on Dr. Mark's Feral Dog Blog.)

Approaching the Dog

It is best if you have three people on hand, though two can be effective. Two people carry Y poles, and one carries a towel. The lead person will first greet the animal and will eventually use the pole on the neck. This is all about guiding the animal while helping her feel safe to cooperate. If you are calm and relaxed, it will help calm the dog.

If the dog is a candidate for the Y pole, she will eventually settle into a corner. She may be standing or lying down, but she will not be trying to flee with your every movement.

Hold the Y pole so the padded tines are directly up and down. Keep the fork at the dog's eye level or slightly lower, and slowly

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A towel on the dog's head can comfort her, as well as make things safer for the handler.

move toward the dog, a few steps at a time, then stop and settle. Each time, move a few steps, then settle and allow the dog to recognize that she's still safe as you move closer. This—moving into the animal and moving with the animal at the same time, without scaring her—is the most difficult part to learn.

As you move, do not focus on catching or controlling the dog. Focus on greeting the animal with kindness so she feels safe. Remember: Think of the Y pole as a compassionate extension of your hand; let the animal know that the Y pole is not a threat. Take your time.

Engaging the Dog

Move the pole toward the corner of the dog's mouth and let her bite the Y pole if she wants to. Don't react—when she bites, do not pull back with the pole. That will only encourage her to bite more and will make her feel less safe. Let her chew on it until she gets bored. As she settles, consider rubbing the tip of one fork below her ear and later on the neck, like petting. Let her relax and accept the situation.

Once she settles or submits, pet her a few more times with the Y pole, then gently slide the pole across her neck, pause, and relax. At this time, consider covering her head with the towel, or use the sec-

ond Y pole on her hip and then apply the towel. Covering the eyes is important because it reduces the dog's stress and increases your safety.

Be aware of the vertical angle of your handle. If your handle is too high, the dog might be able to slip under the Y pole. If it is too low, there may be an opening above the Y pole.

With a Y pole in place and a towel on the head, the animal can be handled in many ways. You can examine a surgical site, conduct a physical exam, give vaccinations and minor treatments, or administer chemical capture drugs with a hand syringe or pole syringe. You can also physically restrain her with a head-cover and hobbles (a belt-like strap used to safely and humanely restrain a dog while she's being carried), so she can be moved to another location. By placing the Y pole in front of you and guiding the dog in a soft way, you can also use it to guide her into a transport crate or into another kennel, if there is an open path to it.

What Not to Do With the Y Pole

- Don't poke the animal, or use it in a way that decreases her sense of trust and safety.

- Don't approach the dog with two Y poles at once. That is like two people talking in each of your ears. The person using the Y pole on the hips should be a little behind the person using the pole on the neck. The neck person is in charge.
- Don't be tense—the dog can feel your tension and will be more tense. Teach yourself to relax. Take a slow breath, and consciously relax your shoulders.

What the Y Pole Cannot Do


- The Y pole cannot catch free-ranging dogs. The dog must be confined—to a room, to a large pen. It will work in most restricted spaces—but there must be some degree of confinement in order for the psychological restraint to be effective.
- The Y pole is not effective with every dog. Some dogs may be too skittish and leap away any time the Y pole is moved in their direction. Some "alpha dogs" may refuse to submit. If an alpha dog must be handled, then the Y pole can be used to restrain or distract the dog long enough to give anesthetics with a syringe pole.

But some of what the Y pole cannot do is good: You cannot harm dogs the way that you can with a catch pole. If a problem occurs, you simply back away and start again.

The Y pole also cannot be used in a fast way or at the pace of the handler. The Y pole must be used at the dog's pace. This is a good thing, because instead of forcing a dog to cooperate, we are *asking* the dog to cooperate. It's more respectful, more compassionate, and more humane.

Practice with friendly dogs to get a feeling for how to connect with the animals and successfully interact with them. Although it is very difficult using the Y pole with a goofy, friendly dog who only wants to play, it is great practice, and when properly used, it will not be stressful for the dog.

Animal shelters, spay/neuter programs, and groups responding to disasters and hoarding cases often have to handle difficult dogs who cannot be safely caught with bare hands. Too often these situations turn into a fight, with animals injured and handlers bitten. The ideal solution is to

handle the dog in a calm, respectful manner that is effective, humane, and safe for both people and the dog. Give the dog a chance to cooperate. Reach for the Y pole, calm yourself, and enjoy the improved interactions that are possible. 

Resources

- Go to the Y Pole Page on the website for Global Wildlife Resources Inc. at wildliferesources.org/the-y-pole/.
- Read articles about the Y pole and watch it being used in the video "Using Dominance to Humanely Catch a Wolf" on Johnson's Feral Dog Blog, feraldog.wordpress.com. (Click on the video category for the latter.)
- To purchase a Y pole, visit Tomahawk Live Trap at livetrap.com; Heart of the Earth Animal Equipment at animal-traps.com; Animal Care Equipment Services at animal-care.com; or Global Wildlife Resources at wildliferesources.org/.



Mark Johnson, D.V.M., is a wildlife veterinarian and executive director of Global Wildlife Resources Inc., a nonprofit organization specializing in humane animal capture and handling. In the past 10 years, he has directed his expertise toward improving the lives of people and dogs, and has handled more than 2,000 feral dogs throughout the world, including the Caribbean, India, and tribal lands, and during three rescue operations after Hurricane Katrina. He is the author of the Feral Dog Blog.



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